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ABSTRACT

College athletic programs are too professionally organized to retain their amateur status, the essence of which is participant oriented. Because intercollegiate athletics is at least partly a commercial entertainment and of financial benefit to the sponsoring institution, athletes should be considered "workers." Physical and emotional demands made on the college athlete differ little from those imposed on the professional. Reasons for colleges' retaining their amateur status include the widely believed claim that commercialism and academic values are incompatible, and the fear of loss of control over athletes, usually by awarding or withdrawing "scholarships." College sports programs should be considered professional, and athletes should: 1) know their legal rights, 2) sign and understand the scholarship as a legal contract, and 3) form advisory and social committees to meet student athlete needs. (CJ)

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# AMATEURISM AS AN EXPLOITATIVE IDEOLOGY

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Big time college sport is a highly rationalized form of commercial entertainment. It is a business much like any other. Yet, unlike other profit-making ventures, the college sport industry insists on defining its work force as amateurs. It is obviously in the economic interests of those who control commercialized college sport to see that amateur principles are strictly enforced. However, the imposition of an amateur label on what is clearly professional sport is the source of most of the hypocracy, exploitation, and unethical conduct presently associated with college athletics in America.

The transformation of college sport into mass commercial entertainment was well underway by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1875, the Yale University Football Club reported gate receipts of $860. By 1906, the year the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was founded, Yale had boosted football receipts to $73,429 (Westby and Sack, 1976: 630). Walter Camp, the "father" of American football, unabashedly extolled the virtues of free enterprise in college sport. "Demand", said Camp, "should determine ticket prices, and Yale should profit from the attraction" (Lewis, 1964: 68). Modern day advocates of corporate college sport, such as Notre Dame's Reverend Joyce, never hesitate to echo these sentiments (c.f. Joyce, 1977).

While the NCAA has dedicated itself to stamping out professionalism among athletes, it has never questioned a university's right to stage mass athletic spectacles for

commercial gain. Big time college sport currently generates millions of dollars in revenue. Notre Dame, in 1978, brought in $3 million in regular football revenues and earned $670,000 from other sports (mainly basketball). In that same year, the "Fighting Irish" cleared an additional $1 million in their Cotton Bowl appearance against Houston (Forbes, 1979). As is the case with any business, only those firms (universities) which use sound management and marketing practices turn a profit.[1] Given the high stakes, however, hundreds of universities have seen fit to enter the entertainment business.

It is difficult to accept prevailing definitions of big-time college athletes as amateurs. According to Scott (1971: 96), the essence of amateur sport is that it is primarily participant oriented. Entertaining spectators is a peripheral concern, if that. Amateurs may choose to push themselves to the limits of human endurance, or in line with certain aristocratic pretensions, they may keep their athletic involvement at a low key. The point is that amateurs, unlike paid professionals, are more or less free to determine the nature and the extent of their athletic involvement. Because amateur sport is free from the pragmatic concerns of making a living, it provides opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking often denied to professional athletes.

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[1] As Sack (1977) and many others have pointed out, many of the economic benefits of big time college sport are indirect such as alumni support, public relations, etc.

When sport becomes mass commercial entertainment, as it has at the big time intercollegiate level, winning becomes an economic necessity. Spectators follow a winning team, not one that is foundering. To win, skilled athletes are recruited from throughout the country and are placed under the control of a staff of professional coaches. In return for athletic services rendered, the college athlete receives a one year renewable contract, or scholarship, entitling him or her to room, board, and tuition. At many universities, athletes also receive money from alumni and other sources not recognized as legitimate by the NCAA.

The threat of withdrawing an athlete's financial support is an effective method of control, especially when athletes have no other source of income. Thus, like any professional athlete, the college ballplayer must trade off a degree of personal autonomy to secure his or her economic well being. The high degree of rationalization necessary to produce winning (i.e., entertaining teams) generally forces the "play" element into the background. This further increases athletes' reliance on extrinsic rewards and makes it far more likely that they will experience their own bodies as alien objects that they no longer control.

The actual physical and emotional demands made on a big-time college athlete differ little, if at all, from those faced by professionals.[2] Big-time college athletes who later

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[2]A study by Sack and Thiel (1979) found that of the Notre Dame football players in their study who later played pro ball, 68 percent found playing at Notre Dame to be as physically and psychologically demanding at professional football.

turn professional seldom have problems adjusting to the professional regimen. Practices, team meetings, film sessions, training rules, road trips, and even games themselves are virtually the same at the professional and big-time college level. Alan Page, a perennial All Pro defensive lineman in the National Football League, reports that his initial fears about joining the Vikings' training camp as a rookie were quickly dispelled. The first intersquad scrimmage was surprisingly similar to football at Notre Dame.[3]

Given the glaring contradictions between the NCAA's definition of college athletes as amateurs and the realities of working in the college sport industry, one is moved to ask why the myth of amateurism has had such a tremendous hold on college sport in America. Part of the answer is that the amateur ethic performs important ideological functions. According to Mannheim (1936:194) an ideology is a set of "situationally transcendent" ideas which are incongruent with underlying reality. Ideologies protect interests and act as rationalizations for action; their purpose is not to present an accurate picture of reality.

Not all those who embrace an ideology are engaged in conscious deception to further selfish interests. The average fan, for instance, may have an unconscious psychological need to believe that college athletes are amateurs. For many fans,

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[3] These comments were made by Page in an interview following the Connecticut Sportswriter's banquet in January 1980.

college sport is a much needed escape from the demands and realities of the work-a-day world. Spectators participate vicariously in the heroic exploits of their favorite athletes and want to believe that athletics transcend the pragmatic concerns of everyday life. To accept the fact that the seemingly carefree gods of the athletic pantheon are only laboring human beings like themselves would rob fans of an important aspect of their fantasy life.

Among those who control universities the amateur ideology helps to validate claims for social status. Commercialism in any form has always been viewed as inconsistent with received and cherished academic values. This is especially true at America's most prestigeous colleges and universities. By clinging to the myth that big time college athletes are amateurs and that sport is educational, universities can give an air of respectability to what is obviously "crass" commercial entertainment. Without the cloak of the amateur ideology, scholar athletes would assume the status of employees, college presidents and governing boards would be exposed as sport's entrepreneurs, and the NCAA would suddenly come under scrutiny as an illegal business cartel. Such is the power of ideology to transform reality.

That the amateur myth facilitates economic exploitation seems obvious. The NCAA, as Koch (1971, 1973) and Sage (1979) have convincingly argued, acts as a cartel which controls wages, restricts competition, and maximizes profits in the area of intercollegiate athletics. The effectiveness of the

NCAA and its amateur code in restricting wages is vividly illustrated by the fact that the average yearly salary of college athletes in 1978 was $4,500, while players in the NFL and NBA averaged $66,000 and $140,000, respectively (Kennedy and Williamson, 1978). The myth of amateurism has become so well institutionalized that even athletes themselves feel guilty about demanding a bigger share of the revenues they are largely responsible for generating.

The refusal of NCAA and university officials to recognize big time college athletes as workers subjects athletes to a variety of abuses, some of which occur even at schools with smaller scale athletic programs. Many students work while they are in college. Few jobs, however, are as physically and emotionally draining as professional college sport. The pressures and time constraints on a big-time college athlete make serious scholarship difficult, if not impossible. To quote Bear Bryant, Alabama's hard driving coach, "At the level we play, the boy is really an athlete first and a student second" (Michner, 1976).

It should not be surprising, given the strains inherent in the scholar-athlete role, to find athletes arguing in courts of law that the education promised in their contract was not forthcoming.[4] Nor should it be surprising that many

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[4] Six ballplayers at the California State University have sued the university for not delivering the education promised in their scholarship.

athletes cheat, cut classes, and take a number of other academic shortcuts (c.f. Sack and Theil, 1979). These problems are not caused by a handful of deviant athletes. Rather, they are systemic and reflect deep seeded contradictions in the overall structure of college sport. The system guarantees the subversion of academic values.

College coaching presents a classic illustration of role conflict. On the one hand, big-time college coaches are judged by the same criteria as coaches at the professional level. College administrators and governing boards demand that coaches win games, fill stadia, and meet the entertainment needs of alumni. A losing coach is fired. On the other hand, college coaches are hampered in their coaching role by an amateur code of ethics which denies that big-time college sport is primarily commercial entertainment, and insists that education, not winning, is the major priority. These contradictions lead to predictable results.

If coaches become overly concerned with the academic and human needs of athletes, they may have to accept practices which make winning less likely, and thus threaten their very livelihoods. If they do what is logical and necessary to win, they are attacked by the NCAA. Given these contradictory demands, the ability to skillfully circumvent NCAA regulations has been informally incorporated into the role requirements of the college coach. The incompetent coach is not one who violates NCAA regulations, but one who is caught. This "watergate" mentality has become the norm in college sport.

Examples of illegal recruiting practices including the falsification of transcripts are too numerous to cite, and a cursory examination of most big time athletic programs will reveal a blatent disregard for the academic needs of athletes. Practices and games scheduled during class time, road trips during final exams, double sessions during mid-terms, long demanding schedules and post session games - these and many other practices have become routine in many schools. In fact, there is tacit agreement among those who control college sport that such policies (whether legal or illegal) are necessary to guarantee top quality athletic entertainment. Thus, punitive action is generally only taken against a coach when such abuses become so flagrant as to cause possible embarrassment, or when justification is needed for unloading a coach who is already viewed as a liability.

To blame the corruption of big-time college athletics on a handful of impressionable adolescents or on a few occupationally insecure college coaches is a clear case of blaming the victims. Those who control the college sport industry, i.e., college presidents, boards of governors, and influential alumni are the people primarily responsible for the major problems plaguing college sport. It is they and the NCAA cartel that serves their interests, that turned universities into centers of commercial entertainment. It is they who profit most from the myth of amateurism.

Any attempt at eliminating athletic corruption must make the debunking of this amateur ideology its starting point.

Pressing the courts to recognize a scholarship as a legal contract between an employer and an employee is one method of dispelling this myth. Challenging the NCAA as an illegal business cartel might be another. Although the unionization of college athletes is unlikely, players organizations of various types could do much to force universities to restore a modicum of honor and fair play into the area of big-time intercollegiate sport. Such organizations could perform the following functions: 1. They could inform incoming athletes of their legal rights. 2. They could serve an advocacy function for athletes who have greviances against coaches, faculty or administration. 3. They could serve as social clubs to allow athletes from various teams to meet and get to know one another better and to "humanize" the college athletic experience.

Player's organizations would not be part of the formal structure of the university or the athletic department and would be run by student athletes. Many athletes already realize that neither coaches nor faculty and administrators have their best interests in mind. Thus, support for an organization which allows athletes to protect themselves might strike a responsive cord even among conservative or apolitical student athletes. In the future such organizations might decide to join with athletes from other schools and if deemed appropriate they could begin to function like a union.

Faculty, former college athletes and others who share a concern for the rights of student athletes could serve as

advisors for these player's organizations and could also work to establish centers for athlete's rights on college campuses. These centers could serve as clearinghouses for information of concern to sports activists, and could help inform faculty Senates and academic standards committees of what is going on in athletic departments. Perhaps projects could be undertaken such as publishing pamphlets for high school guidance counselors describing the ins and outs of college recruiting and preparing parents of young athletes to handle the hard sell they are likely to face. Information on number of athletes who graduate, priorities of various coaches, and other useful information could be provided.

The time for exposes on college sport is past. Only a serious effort to organize athletes, concerned faculty, enlightened administrators, and others will have an effective impact. The ultimate goal must be to debunk the ideology of amateurism and to create an athletic system that doesn't rest on lies and deceit. Only when this is accomplished will college sport be able to play a vital role in the human development of young athletes.

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